

## NOTE: ON WILLIAM JAMES

by JOHN BELOFF

### FOREWORD BY ADRIAN PARKER

As an undergraduate student at Edinburgh I had begun reading some of the works of William James and was impressed by them. I was therefore delighted, when attending John Beloff's lecture series on the Philosophical Aspects of Psychology, to hear him introducing James as his own favourite psychologist and philosopher. Later, when I had returned as his doctoral student, he invited me to the seminar he gave to the Centre for Research in the Educational Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. John always prepared his seminars and lectures in the form of a written text, which he would then read from, often dressed in his academic gown. Reading from a text may seem today to be pedagogically antiquated but it suited him and the lectures were given in such a scholarly and engaging manner that they were always greatly appreciated. There was one aspect where he was actually in advance of his time: he would also produce lecture notes for students, which are standard practice today, but then were virtually unheard of. He kindly gave me the full text of the seminar on James, which I preserved and reproduce below with his family's permission.

Some of these texts would then form the basis for his published writings, which perhaps in part explains his impressive number of publications (which include four books and two edited ones), all in the period prior to the proliferation of the internet. However, this lecture/seminar was not one of them, nor was it listed anywhere. When I later reminded John, he modestly replied that he doubted its importance. The essay, however, has gained importance because the stature of William James has grown with time and many authorities would regard James as the founder of modern Anglo-American psychology. Sixty years ago it was already being said that "there is no comparable author whose roots run farther back and spread more widely, or whose branches stretch out into the present" (Mace, 1950, p.7). The essay by Beloff provides a short and scholarly introduction to some of William James's major ideas and John's own comments on them. To have access to these comments seems highly appropriate, given that John Beloff (along with contemporary psychologists, Stanley Krippner and Charles Tart) can be regarded as an intellectual heir of James.

Beloff's paper, reproduced here, documents the fact that psychical research was one of James's major interests, along with philosophy and psychology. As the importance of James to the history of psychology has grown, there has unfortunately been a tendency in many texts either not to mention his major interest in psychical research or else to try to discredit it.<sup>1</sup> This effort to re-write history and eliminate psychical research from James's interest in psychology is surely misconceived. Carlos Alvarado and Stanley Krippner have recently published a paper in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* showing

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<sup>1</sup> I was told on a recent visit to the Philosophy Department at Lund University that the tendency is true of James's contemporary and near colleague, Henry Sidgwick, who as well as being a founder and President of the Society for Psychical Research made major contributions in the field of ethics that are recognized today.

the relevance of psychical research for James's psychological thinking such as on consciousness, subliminal perception and dissociation (Alvarado & Krippner, 2010).

The effort to discredit usually singles out his investigation of the mediumship of Mrs Leonore Piper, whom James regarded as his "one white crow" (thus proving that not all crows are black—or in this case that not all the evidence is fraudulent). Martin Gardner's paper (1996) is then cited as showing how James fell naively for the medium's method of constantly fishing for information. However, Gardner's paper has itself been largely discredited by Taylor (2011), who pointed out that the major investigations of the medium were delegated to Richard Hodgson, who was initially sceptical and well-versed in the alternative explanations that Gardner resorts to, and in fact was one of the first to give them publicity.

Another method of dealing with what for many psychologists is an embarrassing interest for the grandfather of modern psychology is to quote from James himself in the words of his essay, "Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher" (Fancher & Rutherford, 2012, p.323). Here he reveals that, after twenty-five years, he is baffled and no further forward—with the implication left to the reader that James found psychical research not to be a worthy pursuit. The essay by John Beloff is one of the few I know which gives the full text of this quote rather than a selected part, and reveals that James goes on to say about the existence of the phenomena, "I am not baffled at all, for I am fully convinced of it". This alone is reason to disseminate John Beloff's excellent paper.

### SEMINAR ON WILLIAM JAMES BY JOHN BELOFF OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY<sup>2</sup>

The first question which confronted me when I was asked to talk to you about James was, what aspect of James? Although James is certainly one of my heroes, my assignment is not an easy one, because, unlike most of the other outstanding figures in the history of psychology, he is not associated with any particular discovery or achievement or any single original idea. His main importance was twofold: he was the first, and many would add the greatest, of American psychologists—it was he, after all, who introduced the new psychology into America—and he wrote so superbly that he can still be read with pleasure. But he was temperamentally averse to that single-minded pursuit of any one idea or any one cause which we so often associate with the man of genius. He was too sceptical, too self-critical and too sensitive to the diverse intellectual currents of his time to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to a single overriding goal. It is no wonder that when, in 1909, a year before his death, he met Freud, whose work had long intrigued him, he described him afterwards as "a man obsessed with fixed ideas". Fixed ideas were, of course, just the sort of things that were most alien to the open-minded and unfanatical James. Yet, by the same token, James is much harder to sum up in a brief compass than

<sup>2</sup> Seminar, 7 February 1973, given at the Centre for Research in the Educational Sciences, University of Edinburgh.

Freud; there is no single strand running through his work on which a speaker can fasten.

However, bearing in mind the special interests of my host today, Professor Liam Hudson,<sup>3</sup> it occurred to me that, if James did not exactly introduce the distinction between convergers and divergers, he at any rate proposed a distinction that seems closely related to it, namely that between the tough- and the tender-minded. Since these terms have been appropriated by later psychologists who have used them in a variety of ways, it is worth noting what James himself originally intended by them. They first occur in his book *Pragmatism* of 1907. The book itself was concerned to expound a theory of truth which it was hoped could provide an escape from the many insoluble disputes which had hitherto divided philosophers. The trick was to ask what difference *in practice* it would make if one adopted one answer rather than another. If it would make *no* difference, then we would realise that it was nothing more than a temperamental bias which made some people favour one solution and some another. James suggested that much of the history of philosophy could best be understood in this way as the clash of incompatible temperaments. On the one side you have your tough-minded thinker, who tends to be sceptical, empiricist, a materialist, a determinist and irreligious; on the other side you have your tender-minded thinker, who tends to be the opposite of all these things, he is dogmatic, *a-priori*, an idealist, a believer in free will and religious. This attempt to interpret ideological differences in psychological terms is, I submit, a very Hudsonian one. What makes it curious in the case of James, however, is that, as Ayer has pointed out in his book, James himself defies classification in terms of his own dichotomy.

Undoubtedly there was plenty of robust tough-mindedness in James's style and outlook. He was always intensely suspicious of the large philosophical abstractions and he despised all tidy systems, however logically consistent, which ignored the rawness and rough edges of the real world. It was this that made him such a merciless critic of Idealism, whose powerful influence had begun to be felt even at Harvard. James at all times wanted to submit every belief and preconceived idea to the bar of common sense and practical experience. Moreover, many of his most distinctive psychological theories have a pronounced materialistic flavour: his theory of the emotions, for example, or his theory of self-identity, both of which lay strong emphasis on the body and on bodily sensations. Yet, at the same time, it would be impossible to ignore his definite tender-minded leanings; he hankered after a belief in God, and, generally, after the consolations of religion. It is true he had little use for any sort of formal systematic theology, but he thought he had found a good pragmatic argument for a belief in God. Not, indeed, in an omnipotent God who condoned evil, but perhaps in a god of finite power yet of unadulterated goodness. His abiding interest in psychical research and in religious and mystical experiences, as well as in the potentialities of mental healing, can only be understood as a flight from materialistic science and from the tough-minded side of his make-up.

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<sup>3</sup> Liam Hudson, Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Edinburgh, who coined the terms convergent and divergent thinking.

Nor do I think we would find it any easier to place James on the familiar convergent/divergent polarity, not at any rate if we interpret this as the tension between the scientist and the artist in his nature. Thus, at the age of 18, he announced to his family that he wanted to become a painter, and the sketches of his which I have seen reproduced show that he was not without talent, but after a year's apprenticeship with a painter at Newport, he changed his mind and promptly took up the study of chemistry. Eventually he settled for medicine and in due course obtained his MD from Harvard, in 1869, but the thought of going into practice was too much for him and the rest of his career was a tug-of-war between his scientific and his philosophical inclinations. As I said, he brought psychology to America and he was certainly fascinated by the whole idea of bringing science to bear on the study of mind, but he was too easily repelled by the drudgery of the laboratory to become another Wundt. Indeed, in one of his more amusing aphorisms he said that psychophysics could only have been invented in a country whose natives were incapable of boredom! It was with immense relief that he eventually handed over the running of the Harvard laboratory to Hugo Münsterberg, whom he brought over from Germany specially for that purpose, in order that he could then devote more time to more congenial pursuits. Yet his biographer Allen mentions that previously he had always tried to make a point of putting in a couple of hours of research a day there so as to counteract his own tendency towards subjectivity. But, in the end, we find him writing to his friend Carl Stumpf, in 1895, "as I grow older I get impatient (and incompetent) of details and turn to broad abstractions", and a few years later, in 1899, he writes again:—

I fear I am ceasing to be a psychologist and becoming exclusively a moralist and metaphysician, I have surrendered all psychology teaching to Münsterberg and his assistant, and the thought of psycho-physical experimentation, and altogether of brass-instrument and algebraic formula psychology fills me with horror. [After which he goes on to bemoan the latest news from France announcing the condemnation of Dreyfus.]

Like Freud, who never wanted to become a physician, James was probably by nature a diverger and a speculative thinker, but being, like Freud, a child of his age, he had enormous respect and reverence for exact science and always hoped that by immersing himself in it he would steel himself against the urge to indulge in the unrestrained play of imaginative ideas. Freud had started his career as a physiologist and as a follower of the strict materialistic school of medicine of Helmholtz, as represented by his teacher Ernst Brücke, but, as he grew older, his speculations carried him further and further away from this biological point of departure. With James it may have been that his recurrent bouts of ill-health, which interfered with his active pursuits and led to much introspective soul-searching, were partly responsible for the direction which he took. Unlike Freud, however, he never found a single unifying theme into which to direct his thinking and as a consequence has remained a much less influential figure.

So much, then, for the sort of person we are dealing with. I want now to turn to some of his particular achievements. But which? His contributions to psychology are, for the most part, contained in his one *magnum opus*, *The Principles*, but it is by no means easy to thread one's way through its labyrinthine pages,

in which philosophical, physiological and clinical psychology alternate with one another and the whole is interspersed with his many shrewd observations on life and much sage advice to the reader. For this occasion, however, I have selected two topics which, I think, illustrate as well as any the tenor of James's thought, first his views on the nature and aims of psychology as a science and secondly his theory of the will. In addition I shall also say something later about his work in psychical research if only because, as a parapsychologist myself, this is naturally an aspect of James that specially interests me. I do not propose, however, to discuss his contributions as a pure philosopher. Let us start, however, with James on psychology. He conveniently defines psychology for us in the very first sentence of *The Principles*, where he states, "Psychology is the Science of Mental Life," adding "both of the phenomena and their conditions". He then proceeds to give as examples of mental phenomena "[such things as] we call feelings, desires, cognitions, reasonings, decisions and the like", while as examples of "their conditions" he makes it clear that he refers to the state of the brain and nervous system, to the body, the environment and, in general, to the material substratum of mental activity. But he refuses to attach too much weight to any formal definition, believing rightly, I think, that in science it is better to begin with no more than certain vague terms of reference, letting posterity decide what is or is not relevant to the field of inquiry. This at once distinguishes James from Wundt and the pioneers of the new psychology, whose work he first heard about in 1867, when he was spending a year studying and recuperating in Germany. They too, of course, were interested in the necessary conditions of mental activity, but what in their view differentiated psychology from physiology and from the other natural sciences was that psychology was concerned primarily with inner or immediate experience and this could only be investigated using introspection of a suitably refined and analytical kind. In America the Wundtian standpoint was represented, in an even more uncompromising form, by E. B. Titchener, an Englishman who after studying under Wundt at Leipzig had been given a Chair at Cornell University. This school of psychology based itself on a conception of mind that had been taken over ready-made from the Empiricist philosophers. All conscious experiences were assumed to be composed of certain elementary sensory qualities or sensations. The task of the psychologist was to introspect his states of consciousness under controlled and specifiable conditions, to analyse them into their sensory constituents and, if possible, discover the laws of association whereby simple experiences combine to produce complex experiences. Psychologists differed from their philosophical precursors only in the way in which they practised introspection, for which they trained themselves in a systematic and rigorous fashion.

James repudiated this whole view of psychology for a variety of reasons but perhaps principally on account of its narrowness and artificiality. He did not, as the behaviourists were to do later, question the importance of introspection, but he considered that the analysis of conscious states for its own sake was of much less interest than seeking to understand what part they played in the life and behaviour of the subject; not what consciousness consists of but what it is *for* was for him the vital question.

He also challenged the atomistic assumptions upon which their analyses

were based. In his celebrated chapter on the Stream of Thought he argues that to chop up experience in this fashion is to do violence to its flow and continuity, to the fact that our consciousness is perpetually in a state of becoming, not just of being. The Wundtians, for their part, were dubious about talking of a function for conscious experience since, according to the orthodox view of the mind-body relationship to which they subscribed, ideas, thoughts, desires, etc., are no more than reflections of the relevant physical processes that are going on in the brain — they are *epiphenomena* and, as such, can have no influence upon behaviour, which is governed exclusively by events in the nervous system. James, however, was unorthodox in this respect: he could not bring himself to believe that nature could have evolved creatures like ourselves with our highly developed consciousness if it was all to no purpose, so that for all the good it does we might just as well have been insentient automata.

Thus there came about the first split in the new movement between those whom James called 'Structuralists' because they were interested in the structure or content of consciousness and the 'Functionalists'. Functionalism was more than anything an attempt to unite in a single synthesis evolutionary biology, with its implications for the adaptiveness of behaviour, and Empirist philosophy, with its insistence on the primacy of experience, which, in the hands of Peirce, Dewey and James, became Pragmatism. Most of the prominent American psychologists of the time, notably J. R. Angell at Chicago and Stanley Hall at Clark, were to be found belonging to the Functionalist fold. The outstanding exception was, of course, E. D. Titchener, who just by being outside it helped to define it. It was never a tightly knit school or a precise doctrine, but it was conveniently broad enough to embrace animal psychology and child psychology and it remained the dominant American school until it was superseded by Behaviourism after the First World War. To its critics, however, it appeared not to be sufficiently in advance of the old-fashioned common-sense psychology.

The Will is not a concept one would expect to find in a modern psychological work; if one comes across it anywhere today it is more likely to be in a philosophical context. In James however, it occupies a central position and there are, I would suggest, three reasons why this should be so. First, having rejected orthodox epiphenomenalism, James felt called upon to provide some account of just how the mind could influence the workings of the body. Secondly, James was anxious to vindicate his own belief in free will and, although he realised that no mere psychological account of our volitional processes could guarantee that our will was free in an absolute metaphysical sense, nevertheless it helped to keep the topic in the forefront of his mind. Thirdly, as a practical moralist, James was always looking for ways of developing one's will-power; he thought that it was in the exercise of his will that man reveals his most noble and heroic qualities and he knew from personal experience the struggle that this involved.

Like Kant before him, James was acutely conscious of the two opposing demands that are made upon our philosophical allegiance: the scientific one, according to which we must strive to bring everything under the rule of natural law, of causation, of predictability and so forth; and the moral one, according to which, in James's words, "what *ought* to be *can* be". He concluded that, since

we have no way of deciding between the truth of these rival postulates, we are pragmatically justified in adopting the postulate of freedom. He writes:—

As a mere conception, and as long as we confine our view to the nervous centres themselves . . . few things are more seductive than this radically mechanical theory of their action. And yet consciousness is there and has, in all probability, been evolved, like all other functions, for a use. Its use seems to be that of selection; but to select it must be efficacious. States of consciousness which feel right are held fast to; those which feel wrong are checked . . . Probability and circumstantial evidence run dead against the theory that our actions are purely mechanical in their causation.

However, in the classic Cartesian doctrine of the will, an act of willing is conceived of as essentially a case of an immaterial soul acting upon the machinery of the nervous system. James never took kindly to the idea of a Cartesian soul or a Kantian transcendental ego; these were just the sort of abstractions for which pragmatism was recommended as a corrective. But James assumed that we understood quite clearly what we mean by a thought and, accordingly, he put forward a theory whereby a thought could translate itself directly and immediately into physical action. "Movement," he points out, "is the natural immediate effect of feeling irrespective of what the quality of the feeling may be. It is so in reflex action, it is so in emotional experience and it is so in voluntary life." He then lays it down that "every representation of a movement awakens in some degree the actual movement which is its object; and awakens it in a maximum degree whenever it is not kept from doing so by an antagonistic representation present simultaneously to the mind". This, in a nutshell, is his 'Ideo-Motor' Theory of action (the term itself he attributes to the physiologist W. B. Carpenter). But could this be a sufficient account of what is involved in a volition? What about that peculiar mental effort we associate with a deliberate act of will? That something extra which, in James's words, appears to us "in the shape of a fiat, decision, consent, volitional mandate or other synonymous phenomenon of consciousness", which we feel to be necessary before the actual movement can follow?

James's answer was that for ordinary routine behaviour of the kind we would call voluntary, the mere *idea* of the desired action was indeed sufficient, but when the positive thought is for some reason blocked by antagonistic thoughts tending to inaction, then if the former is to win we require an extra effort of attention in order to overcome this antagonism: "the essential achievement of the will, when it is most voluntary, is to *attend* to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind. The so doing *is* the fiat; and it is a mere physiological incident that, when the object is thus attended to, immediate motor consequences should ensue." James gives some characteristically homely illustrations by way of illustrating his theory: the drunkard thinking up reasons for allowing himself just one more drink, the slug-a-bed teetering on the verge of getting up on a cold morning, the sailor in a shipwreck struggling against his impulse to fall asleep. James departs from the traditional hedonistic theory of motivation according to which our choice of action is decided by the relative amount of pleasure or pain we expect from its outcome; the thought of pleasure is a powerful instigator of action, James agreed, but it is not the only one or even the most typical. Our motives spring from a variety of sources, some of them hidden and instinctive, and pleasure is more plausibly regarded

as the result of the successful fulfilment of some objective than as its *cause*.

James's theory of the will was not entirely original; he acknowledges his debt to the French philosopher Renouvier, who had had a strong influence on his thinking in this area, and I do not know whether it even strikes you as at all plausible. For my part, though I think that attention may well be a necessary component in anything we would want to call an act of will, I doubt whether it amounts to a sufficient condition. The *ideo-motor* theory strikes me as being of more relevance to the phenomenon of suggestibility than to that of will. However, I fancy I caught an echo of James's theory in the lecture which Waddington gave in the Gifford lectures which he entitled "Determinism and Life". He too suggested that perhaps the crucial constituent of any real act of will is precisely the effort of concentrating one's whole attention on the objective one has in mind.

I come lastly to James as psychical researcher. The study of the paranormal is not on the face of it something that fits easily into the framework of a Functionalist psychology and, indeed, not many of his contemporaries were willing to follow James in this direction. He parted company with his more sceptical friend Münsterberg on this issue and it was not really until William McDougall came to Harvard in 1920 that another psychologist of comparable stature took over where James left off; it was McDougall who launched J. B. Rhine and his Laboratory after McDougall had moved from Harvard to Duke University. James's interest was thus to some extent idiosyncratic, if not quixotic; as his biographer Perry remarks, he often preferred the rejected and despised among movements as among men feeling that there was something almost vulgar about success, and yet, for all that, as Perry admits, this interest was "not just one of his vagaries but central and typical". It may well have had some connection with the fact that his father, Henry James Sr, was a devoted follower of the 18th-century Swedish savant, Emmanuel Swedenborg, the author of a number of esoteric books which foreshadow the Spiritualist movement of the next century. But I like to think that what attracted James to this field was having a restless and inquiring mind and an intellect too honest to ignore any claims—no matter how outlandish or preposterous—provided there was evidence worth looking into. It was this same honesty of intellect which then prevented him from ever committing himself too unreservedly to any definite conclusions.

In a letter to his friend Stumpf, dated New Year's Day 1886, he mentions the work of the recently founded Society for Psychical Research of London and says that he was busy trying to start a similar society in America. "I don't know what you think of such work," he writes, "but I think the present condition regarding it is scandalous, there being a mass of testimony, or apparent testimony, about such things, at which the only men capable of critical judgement—men of scientific education—will not even look", and he concludes the letter: "It is a field in which the sources of deception are extremely numerous. But I believe there is no source of deception in the investigation of nature which can compare with a fixed belief that certain kinds of phenomenon are *impossible*."

Probably the greatest single benefit which James conferred on the field was just the fact that someone of his intellectual distinction was not merely willing to look into it but devoted to it a great deal of time and effort. But, in terms of actual research, his supreme achievement was the discovery of the Boston



medium Mrs Leonore Piper, by common consent the greatest mental medium in the annals of psychical research. James first heard about this woman from his mother-in-law, Mrs Gibbens, who had visited her privately and anonymously and was greatly impressed by how much she seemed to know both about her own and the James family, and her visit was followed by that of James's sister-in-law, who had a sitting with Mrs Piper the day after with even more impressive results. James soon became convinced that here was someone with genuine paranormal powers and he completed his first report on her in 1886 for the first volume of *Proceedings* of the newly founded American Society. By 1890 he was writing to Frederic Myers: "taking everything that I know of Mrs P. into account, the result is to make me feel as absolutely certain as I am of any personal fact in the world that she knows things in her trances which she cannot possibly have heard in her waking state."

These are strong words for James, but he never found any need to qualify them. For the extraordinary thing about Mrs Piper is that, by whatever means, she nearly always knew much more about her anonymous sitters than she had any right to do. And this was true not only in her native Boston, where she might be expected to know a large number of people, but it was no less true when they brought her to England and she had to perform for anonymous sitters in Cambridge or in Liverpool. Of course whether this information came to her as it purported to do and as the Spiritualists believed—from the spirits of those who had passed over to the other side—was quite another matter, and one on which James could never make up his mind. On the one hand, his philosophy allowed him to believe in the possibility of some form of survival but, on the other, he realised the difficulties involved in putting such a construction on the facts. As it turned out it was not long before he had special occasion to tackle this whole problem.

In 1887, the London Society sent their man Richard Hodgson to become permanent secretary of the American Society, which, in 1890, was amalgamated with the London Society (it was not until 1907 that it again became independent and resumed publication of its own *Proceedings*). Hodgson was also deputed to take over the investigation of the Piper case and Mrs Piper was thereafter paid a pension by the Society to make her services available exclusively to their accredited investigators and to enable her to give up her private clientele. Hodgson duly did a very thorough job on Mrs Piper, but then in 1905 he suddenly and unexpectedly dropped dead. Within eight days his alleged spirit was already manifesting at her séances and went on doing so whenever the sitter was a person known to him. In 1908 William James, who had known Hodgson well, was called upon by the American Society, which was now again independent, to write a report on the so-called 'Hodgson-control' for the first volume of their new *Proceedings*. For this James had to collate the stenographic records of 75 sittings! In some of these either he or his wife had acted as sitter and had put questions to the 'control'.

The result was a masterpiece of discernment and open-mindedness. He realised from the start that this was a bad case on which to try to base any firm conclusions about survival, since obviously Mrs Piper knew the living Hodgson very well after all those years. The best he could do therefore in the circumstances was to make certain tentative observations which could be of value if

further corroborative evidence of this sort were forthcoming in future research. However, after pointing out all the possible snags and objections, he writes:—

I myself feel as if an external will to communicate were probably there, that is I find myself doubting, in consequence of my whole acquaintance with that sphere of phenomena, that Mrs Piper's dream-life, even equipped with 'telepathic' powers, accounts for all the results found. But if asked whether the will to communicate be Hodgson's, or be some mere spirit-counterfeit of Hodgson, I remain uncertain and await more facts, facts which may not point clearly to a conclusion for fifty or a hundred years.

Like all parapsychologists to this day, James discovered the hard way how incredibly difficult it is to establish anything for certain in this treacherous field. In the last article he wrote on the topic in 1909, the year before he died, called fittingly "Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher", he writes:—

Like all founders Sidgwick hoped for a certain promptitude of results; and I heard him say the year before his death, that if anyone had told him at the outset that, after twenty years he would still be in the same identical state of doubt and balance that he had started with, he would have deemed the prophecy incredible. It appeared impossible that that amount of handling evidence should bring so little finality of decision.

James then continues:—

My own experience has been similar to Sidgwick's. For 25 years I have been in touch with the literature of psychical research, and have had acquaintance with numerous researchers. I have also spent a good many hours (though far fewer than I ought to have spent) in witnessing or trying to witness phenomena. Yet I am theoretically no 'further' than I was at the beginning; and I confess that at times I have been tempted to believe that the Creator has eternally intended this department of nature to remain baffling, to prompt our curiosities and hopes and suspicions all in equal measure, so that although ghosts and clairvoyances and raps and messages from spirits are always seeming to exist and can never be fully explained away, they also can never be susceptible of full corroboration.

Allen, who I suspect deplores James's devotion to this field, cites this passage as if to show that James was not as credulous as his critics have made out. But in fact the operative word in this sentence is the word 'theoretically'. 'Theoretically' James was no further at the end than at the beginning, but 'pragmatically' there were some conclusions he had come to about which he personally felt no reservation. This is clear from a later passage in this same article where he writes:—

I began . . . by confessing myself baffled. I am baffled, as to spirit return, and as to many other special problems. I am constantly baffled as to what to think of this or that particular story, for the sources of error in any one observation are seldom fully knowable. But weak sticks make strong faggots; and when the stories fall into consistent sorts that point each in a definite direction, one gets a sense of being in the presence of genuinely natural types of phenomena. As to there being such real natural types of phenomena ignored by orthodox science, I am not baffled at all, for I am fully convinced of it.

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#### FURTHER READING

For those who wish to have access to a list of John Beloff's publications, Fiona Steinkamp (2002, pp.179–184) has listed them in her book *Parapsychology, Philosophy and the Mind: Essays Honoring John Beloff*.<sup>4</sup>

For those who wish to know more about this topic of William James and psychical research, the outstanding primary source is Gardner Murphy and Robert Ballou's edited work *William James on Psychical Research* (1960). More recently Deborah Blum (2006) has written a fascinating book (despite the unfortunate title) on the early psychical researchers with a focus on James and Hodgson and using archival material to give a new life to the events and the persons they concerned. For a systematic list of references on this topic, Carlos Alvarado has produced the following bibliography, which he has kindly given permission to reproduce here:–

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## CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor,

**Questioning the Courage of William James**

While I very much appreciate Dr Alan Gauld's generally positive review of my book, *Resurrecting Leonora Piper: How Science Discovered the Afterlife*, in the July 2013 issue of the *Journal* (Gauld, 2013), I do feel a need to address his concerns and comments relative to my remarks about William James, the distinguished psychologist, philosopher and psychical researcher of yesteryear.

In effect, while otherwise admiring Professor James and his pioneering role in psychical research, I dared question his courage, suggesting that he might have accepted the spirit/survival hypothesis much more than he expressed publicly, but sat on the fence all his life out of concern for his reputation in the academic and scientific communities. I further opined that James's attitude might have influenced other researchers to remain on the fence, as to oppose him could have resulted in professional suicide. Of course, the primary researchers in the Piper phenomena — Richard Hodgson, Frederic Myers, Oliver Lodge, and James Hyslop—all had the courage to come off the fence, planting both feet firmly on the side of spirits and survival. And while not then called *superpsi*, the combination of the teloteropathy (telepathy at a distance) and the cosmic reservoir theories amounted to much the same thing, being given full consideration by those esteemed researchers.

Writing in the November 1919 issue of the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, Professor Hyslop, who had known James personally, and, in fact, came to know of Mrs Piper from him, stated that "James seems to have confused means and ends in the method of determining ethical truth, and also to have wholly missed the basis of scientific truth which may be wider than ethical truth." (Hyslop, 1919, p.559, emphasis mine). That is, James's pragmatism was sound for ethics, but was not the criterion of fact which is the object of science and philosophy. "While his aim was apparently to establish science in the place of dogmatism and abstraction," Hyslop went on, "*he stated his position so that it meant something else and only aroused controversy instead of solving a problem. The opposition is between empirical and a priori methods, not between theoretical and practical, or between 'rational' and 'pragmatic' methods*" (loc. cit., emphasis mine).

Hyslop further stated that James leaned toward polytheism and seemed to prefer the doctrine of Spiritualism, but he "*could not openly avow such a doctrine*." He added that "when it came to that one doctrine and the application of his view to it, *he halted with more respect than the logic of his pragmatism required*" (Hyslop, 1919, p.561, emphasis mine).

Hyslop continued:—

The fact is that he never clearly understood the problem of psychic research. This is clearly proved by his anomalous and paradoxical position in the Ingersoll lecture on the immortality of the Soul, delivered at Harvard University. He had very little to do with the Society's work, tho [*sic*] the public thought he had much to do with it, and after he had rejected the spiritual-body doctrine of Swedenborg it was hard to make him see just what the tendencies of psychic research were. He returned to what he ought to

have regarded as wallowing in the mire of Hegelianism when he felt a leaning toward the cosmic reservoir theory. But this aside, the main point is that he could never boldly decide between the respectable philosophy of pantheism or monism and the logical tendencies of his pluralism which should have taken him with less evidence into spiritism than would be required to convert the materialist.

[Hyslop, 1919, pp. 561–563]

In his 1902 classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James didn't even mention Mrs Piper or the extensive research carried out with her by the ASPR and the SPR. He alluded to it by mentioning a "discovery" in 1886 suggesting that there is a consciousness outside of the primary consciousness (James, 1902, p. 191), but steered clear of the 'M' (mediumship) and 'S' (spirits) words.

According to Hyslop, James asked Hodgson to review the proofs of his 1902 book—which was actually a collection of lectures he had given—before they were printed. Hodgson was somewhat perplexed at the fact that in the 400-plus pages of the book James never directly addressed the survival issue, the very crux of religion. He apparently let James know of his disappointment in that respect. Whether to appease Hodgson or to correct his oversight, James then added a postscript to the book. In that section of the book, he wrote:—

Religion, in fact, for the great majority of our own race means immortality, and nothing else. God is the producer of immortality, and whoever has doubts of immortality is written down as an atheist without further trial. I have said nothing in my lectures about immortality or the belief therein, for me it seems a secondary point. If our ideals are only cared for in 'eternity', I do not see why we might not be willing to resign their care to other hands than ours. Yet I sympathize with the urgent impulse to be present ourselves, and in the conflict of impulses, both of them so vague yet both of them noble, I know not to decide. It seems to me that it is eminently a case for facts to testify. Facts, I think, are yet lacking for 'spirit return', though I have the highest respect for the patient labors of Messrs. Myers, Hodgson, and Hyslop, and am somewhat impressed by their favorable conclusions. I consequently leave the matter open, with this brief word to save the reader from possible perplexity as to why immortality got no mention in the body of this book.

[James, 1902, p. 406]

James went on to say that the only thing the religious experience can unequivocally testify to is "that we can experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace" (James, 1902, p. 406).

And yet, while seemingly claiming that survival was a 'secondary' concern, he wrote that "the luster of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with. Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order" (James, 1902, p. 124). In another essay, he stressed that the "permanent presence of the sense of futurity in the mind has been strangely ignored by most writers, but the fact is that our consciousness at a given moment is very free from the ingredient of expectancy" (James, 1948, p. 13). Moreover, James was said to have considered suicide in his younger years as a result of his 'soul sickness', or belief that there was nothing beyond this world.

Early in the book, James stated that the 'moralist'—apparently the name for the humanist at that time—can get by without religious beliefs until the body begins to decay or "when morbid fears invade the mind" (James, 1902, p. 54). The logical inference here is that he was referring to the moralist's fear of extinction and the religionist's hope for life after death.

In concluding the book, before the postscript, James stated, "I *can*, of course, put myself into the sectarian scientist's attitude, and imagine vividly that the world of sensations and of scientific laws and objects may be all. But whenever I do this, I hear that inward monitor of which W. K. Clifford once wrote, whispering the word 'bosh!' Humbug is humbug, even though it bear the scientific name, and the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow 'scientific' bounds." (James, 1902, p. 401)

Still, James continually beat around the bush on the survival issue, disguising it in other words, most often referring to it as the 'eternal'. He said that a person should be content in his or her faith that there is a higher power, even if that higher power does not promise life after death. "For practical life at any rate," he concluded the postscript, "the *chance* of salvation is enough" (James, 1902, p. 408). In effect, he was saying that the blind faith of religion is enough, whereas the goal of psychical research was to move from disbelief or blind faith to conviction through scientifically-developed evidence.

While James seems to have favoured the 'secondary personality' theory when it came to Dr Phinuit and the Emperor group, two of Mrs Piper's primary controls, he never explained why he thought George Pellew, the control between Phinuit and the Emperor group, was a secondary personality. At least I have not been able to find anything in my search of the SPR and ASPR records offering an explanation for not so classifying Pellew, who was known to Hodgson and other researchers before his tragic death at the age of 32. Is it not logical to assume that if Pellew had been incarnate at one time, that both Phinuit and the Emperor group also existed in the flesh at some time in the past?

In 1909, the year before his death, James, who called Mrs Piper his 'white crow', the one who proved that not all crows are black, stated that he was "baffled as to spirit return . . . I personally am as yet neither a convinced believer in parasitic demons, nor a spiritist, nor a scientist, but still remain a psychical researcher waiting for more facts before concluding" (Murphy, 1961, pp. 322-23). Following James's example, today's researchers are still waiting for more facts. Will there ever be enough? Will any of them ever display the courage of Hodgson, Myers, Lodge and Hyslop?

Perhaps James explained his position when he wrote that he was wilfully taking the point of view of the so-called 'rigorously scientific' disbeliever, and making an *ad hominem* plea because, tactically, it is better to believe too little than too much (Murphy & Ballou, 1960, p. 41). I interpret that to mean that he preferred the 'safe' approach, one in which he didn't have to put his reputation on the line. And so it continues.

641 Keolu Drive  
Kailua  
Hawaii 96734, U.S.A.

MICHAEL TYMN

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Alan Gauld replies,

I am grateful for the opportunity of commenting on Michael Tymn's reply to my review. It occurs to me that I may have misunderstood him when he says "To have opposed him [i.e. William James] could have resulted in professional suicide", and if so I apologise. I read this as implying that James might himself conceivably have taken steps to extinguish the careers of these putative opponents. Such an action would have been entirely foreign to him. But if Tymn's meaning was that if an academic psychologist or philosopher had indeed gone further than James in suggesting that psychical research had provided convincing evidence for survival he might have brought down trouble on his own head, I would not disagree.

For the rest, the divergence between my view and Tymn's of the character and opinions of William James is too wide to be gone into here. I will confine myself to making two points:-

1. James's reference to the discovery in 1886 of a consciousness outside the primary consciousness had almost certainly nothing to do with Mrs Piper and mediumship but referred to the early work of Pierre Janet between 1886 and 1889, in which James was much interested.

2. James was usually circumspect in the way he spoke of Phinuit, G.P., etc., but he did at least once verge on saying that G.P. was or had become a secondary personality. In his "Report on Mrs. Piper's Hodgson-Control" (1909, p.38) he says of G.P. "within a few years he has degenerated into a shadow of his former self . . . Whatever he may have been at first, he seems to me at last to have 'passed on', leaving that amount of impression on the trance-organism's habits." If Tymn chooses to interpret this as yet another example of William James facing both ways, so be it!

*Braeside, Park Avenue  
Plumtree Park, Keyworth  
Nottingham NG12 5LU*

ALAN GAULD

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